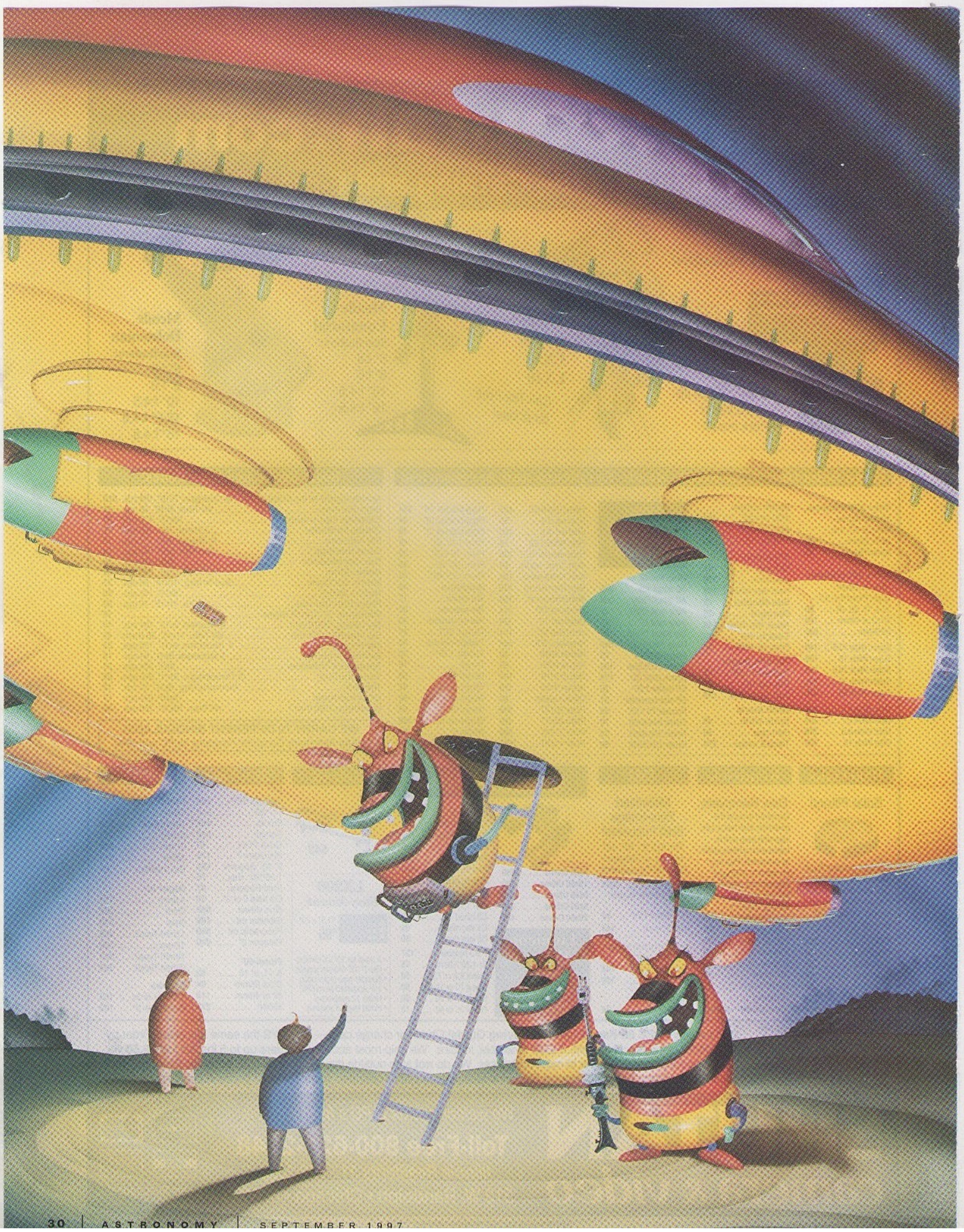


A Field Guide to UFOs

Planets, stars, fireballs, birds, and the moon — all have been commonly mistaken for extraterrestrial spacecraft.

by Philip J. Klass

DESPITE WIDESPREAD MEDIA COVERAGE OF UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects), one important and well-demonstrated fact is seldom mentioned: At least 90 percent of all UFOs are really "Misidentified Prosaic Objects," or MPOs. More than one-third of all UFO reports are generated by bright planets, stars, meteor-fireballs, and even, occasionally, by the moon.

For example, the March 20, 1975, edition of the Yakima, Washington *Herald-Republic* carried a front page feature stating that three credible local citizens reported seeing a bright UFO in the western sky around 9 p.m. and watched it for about 45 minutes "until it disappeared." One man, who described the UFO as being cone-shaped with a "greenish-bluish light at the top and a sort of pale flame light at the bottom," said he had never seen anything like it before. Not surprisingly, the front-page story prompted other Yakima citizens to look for a UFO that night.

The next day's edition reported that many more persons had called in to report seeing the UFO, which had returned to the western sky that night at about the same time. The following day, the newspaper reported that its staff had been "swamped by calls by people mystified and convinced they were seeing an alien craft from outer space."

Fortuitously, one of the callers was an amateur astronomer who, after reading the two previous newspaper articles, had decided to take a look at the UFO. He reported it was the then bright planet Venus. Commendably, the *Herald-Republic* reported the UFO's identification on its front page, whereas many newspapers would have buried the explanation at the bottom of page 18.

There is scant scientifically credible data on the relationship between MPOs and UFOs. Since 1969, when the U.S. Air Force formally ended its 20-plus-year investigation of UFO reports and closed down its Project Blue Book office, nearly all of the people who now investigate UFO reports want to believe that some UFOs represent visitations by extraterrestrial spacecraft.

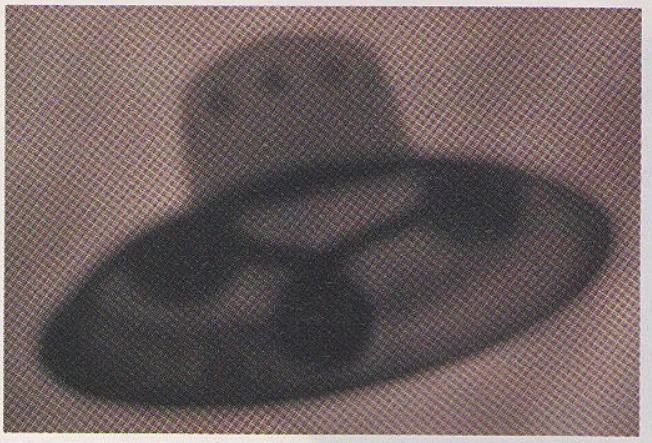
Despite many reports of UFO landings and persons who claim to have been abducted and taken aboard a flying saucer, no one has yet come up with a single credible physical artifact to confirm the ET hypothesis. The "physical evidence" found at alleged UFO landing sites typically consists of broken tree branches, or small holes that could be the work of wild animals, or a hoaxer. Not one of the many so-called "abductees" has come back with an ET souvenir or any new ET scientific information which could be verified to confirm their tale.

Because nearly half a century of UFO investigation has failed to yield a single, scientifically credible physical artifact, the only evidence supporting the ET hypothesis rests entirely on "unexplained" UFO cases. If an investigator is unable to find a prosaic explanation for a UFO report, believers in the ET hypothesis cite this as evidence that the UFO report was generated by an ET craft.

Because nearly all of the persons who now investigate UFO reports are eager to find "unexplainable" cases, this gives them scant incentive to conduct a rigorous investigation of a tough case. During my more than 30 years of investigating UFO reports, several cases required many months of part-time effort to find a prosaic explanation and one required more than two years.

A notable exception is the UFO investigative work of Allan Hendry, who became the chief investigator for the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS), shortly after he graduated

Bill Mayer



Robert Sheaffer

To demonstrate how easy it is to fake UFO photos, UFO skeptic Robert Sheaffer created this flying saucer from a cottage cheese container and an aluminum plate.

from the University of Michigan in 1972 with a B.A. in astronomy and illustration. CUFOS had just been created by J. Allen Hynek, who then headed Northwestern University's astronomy department.

In the late 1940s, the Air Force hired Hynek as a consultant after it discovered that bright celestial bodies generated many UFO reports and that even experienced military pilots sometimes chased after a UFO that turned out to be a bright planet or star. At the time, Hynek was teaching astronomy at Ohio State University — not far from the Project Blue Book offices in Dayton. In 1969, when the Air Force decided to close down Project Blue Book, it terminated Hynek's contract. Several years later he created CUFOS and hired Hendry as its full-time UFO investigator.

For Hendry, with a long-standing interest in UFOs, it was an exciting opportunity. Although Hynek had been a hard nosed skeptic about the ET hypothesis when he was first hired by Project Blue Book, in his later years he became more "open-minded." He hoped that CUFOS could conduct a competent scientific investigation into the UFO mystery. To encourage UFO reports by law enforcement officers, who were considered to be more reliable than the general public, CUFOS obtained a toll-free 800 telephone line whose number was given to many police departments.

During the next 15 months, Hendry personally investigated 1,307 UFO reports submitted to CUFOS — many more cases than any other investigator up to that time, or since. The results were published in 1979 by Doubleday/Dolphin in a book entitled *The UFO Handbook: A Guide to Investigating, Evaluating and Reporting UFO Sightings.*

Hendry's book — regrettably long out of print — provides the most recent scientifically credible data on the many different "trigger mechanisms" which generate UFO reports. Earlier Project Blue Book data is criticized by some who charge that the Air Force's eagerness to explain away UFO reports resulted in

Wallace Baldwin

An alien spaceship on the horizon? Actually it's Venus, which is commonly mistaken for a UFO.

or smaller. Now, if the driver decides to return home, the "UFO" seems to be following the car because it remains the same size and brightness.

It might seem surprising that 22 of the UFO sightings reported to CUFOS turned out to be triggered by the moon. Early in my career as a UFO investigator, I was challenged to explain an incident that had occurred with a Navy aircraft crew on February 10, 1951, while en route from Iceland to Newfoundland. The Project Blue Book files listed the case as "unexplained." After careful study of the crew's report, many hours of investigation, and a bit of luck, this UFO could be identified as the upper tip of a crescent moon which was barely visible at the horizon.

Hendry's investigation showed that nearly 18 percent of all UFO reports were generated by advertising airplanes, which carry strings of lights that spell out an advertising message. When seen at an oblique angle, their strings of flashing lights are perceived as being saucer-shaped. When the pilot decides to turn off the lamps and go home, observers report that the "UFO mysteriously disappeared."

On June 5, 1969, the flight crews of two east-bound airliners flying above 30,000 feet near St. Louis, Missouri, as well as a military jet fighter pilot, reported a near mid-air collision with a "squadron" of hydroplane-shaped UFOs. The incident occurred around 6 p.m., in broad daylight. The military pilot

ET visitors? Giuseppe Grasso photographed these flying saucers over Sicily in 1954. They remain unidentified.

UPI/Corbis-Bettmann

Roberto Boccadoro

An alien spaceship streaking through the atmosphere? Nope, it's a relatively bright yet run-of-the-mill fireball.

reported that at the last minute the UFOs seemed to maneuver to avoid a collision — which could be interpreted as evidence that these objects were "under intelligent control."

Thanks to Allan Harkrader, an alert newspaper photographer in Peoria, Illinois, who was able to take a photo of the UFOs, they could be easily identified as flaming fragments of a meteor-fireball blazing through the atmosphere on a horizontal trajectory. As a meteor enters at very high speed, it ionizes (electrifies) the surrounding air, creating a long, luminous tail. The two airline flight crews and the military pilot, understandably, assumed that the luminosity was the result of sunlight reflecting off metallic objects.

Based on Harkrader's photo and other reports from ground observers, scientists at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory were able to calculate the approximate trajectory of the fireball. They concluded that the fireball actually passed about 125 miles north of St. Louis, at an altitude many thousands of feet higher than the two airliners and the jet fighter. The same fireball fragments were seen by a private pilot who had just landed in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He filed a report on the incident with the Federal Aviation Administration's office in which he estimated the objects had flown directly over the airport's east-west runway at an altitude of only 1,000 feet. His distance estimate was in error by roughly 100 miles.

On March 3, 1968, at approximately 8:45 p.m., a group of three people in Nashville, Tennessee, saw what appeared to be a giant saucer-shaped UFO pass over them in eerie silence at an altitude estimated to be only 1,000 feet. In a detailed report later submitted to the Air Force, they reported seeing many rectangular windows, illuminated from inside the craft.

The Air Force also received a report of the same incident from a group of six people in Shoals, Indiana, 200 miles to the north. They described the UFO as being more cigar-shaped, with a rocket-like flame in the rear, but they too reported seeing rectangular windows, illuminated from inside. They reported it's altitude was "tree-top level."

This UFO proved to be the flaming reentry of a Soviet rocket that had been used to launch the Zond-4 spacecraft on a simulated lunar mission. As the rocket reentered at high speed, it broke into fragments which were heated to

UPI/Corbis-Bettmann

Robert Rinker, a field technician at the Chalk Mountain weather station in Colorado, photographed this UFO in 1967. "Modern photo processing techniques make it so easy to fake UFO photos that older images such as this are much more convincing," says John P. Timmerman of the Center for UFO Studies.

unrealistic explanations. Hendry's data is not vulnerable to such charges because he admitted he would like to find evidence that some UFOs were ET craft.

Of the 1,307 UFO cases that Hendry investigated, he found prosaic explanations for 91.4 percent of them, leaving 113, or 8.6 percent, unexplained. However, Hendry conceded that 93 of these 113 unexplained reports had possible prosaic explanations. This left only 20 cases, or 1.5 percent of the total, as seemingly unexplainable in prosaic terms. Is that evidence that some or all of these 20 unexplained cases involved ET spacecraft?

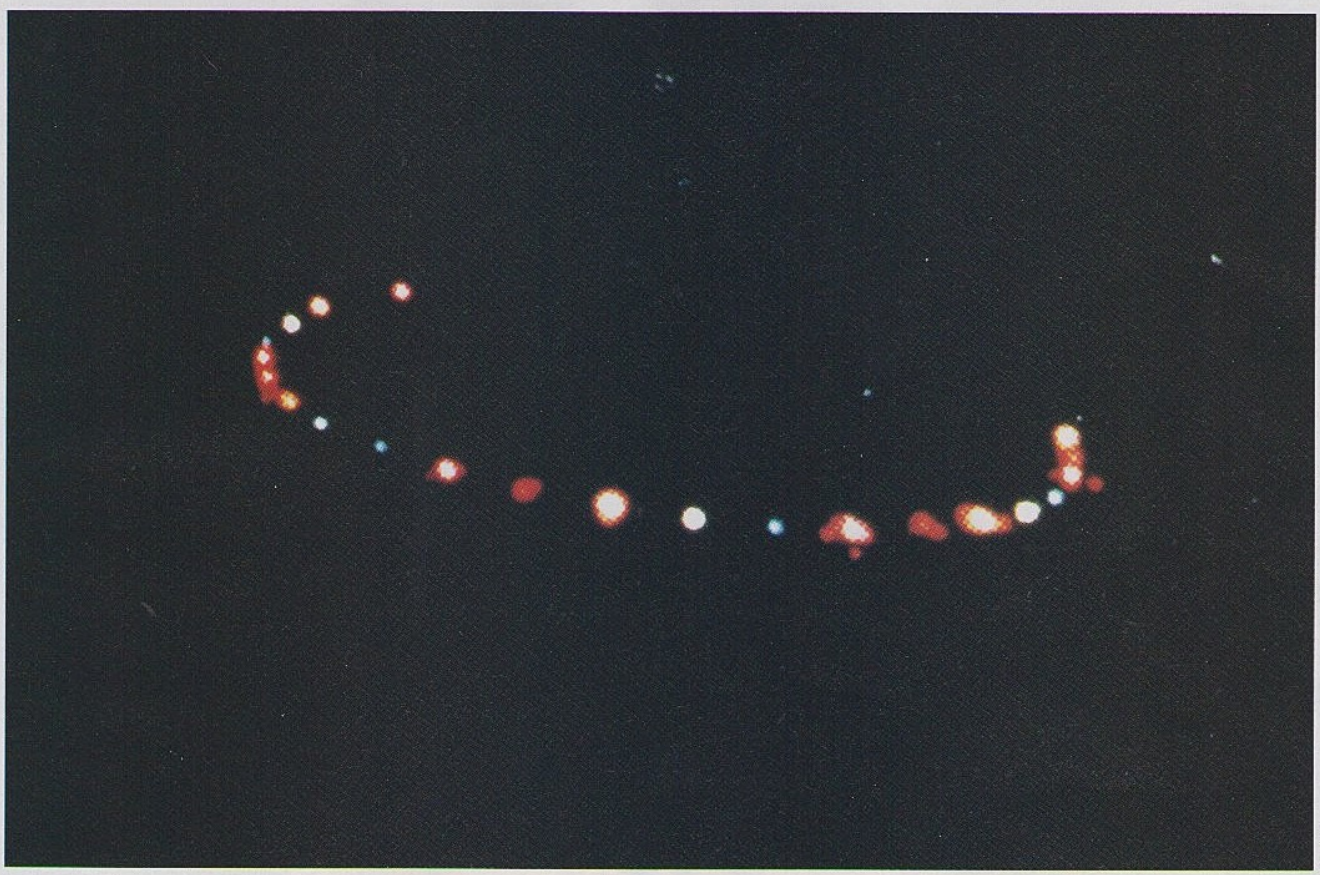
Hendry wisely resisted making any such claim. In the closing pages of his book, he admitted that rigorous investigation alone is not always sufficient to find a prosaic explanation, which sometimes depends on "sheer luck." (Based on my own investigations over the past 30 years, I fully agree.) Another factor, which Hendry does not mention, is that with his other CUFOS duties, which included producing a monthly publication for subscribers, he could spend an average of only two hours in his investigation of each case. Some of the cases I have investigated have required many dozens or hundreds of hours of effort to find a prosaic explanation.

Early in my own career as a UFO investigator, I was "taken in" by several hoaxers who seemed at first to be honest. I suspect that at least several of Hendry's "unexplainable" cases are hoaxes and that he was too trusting, as I had been.

In the concluding pages of Hendry's book, he commented: "How can I be sure if my remaining 'UFOs' aren't simply Identified Flying Objects [i.e. Misidentified Prosaic Objects] misperceived (sincerely) to the point of fantasy? The emotional climate about the subject (as revealed by Identified Flying Objects) appears to be adequate to support such a hypothesis for a great many UFO situations, if not all . . . With our current inability to fully draw the distinction between real UFOs and IFOs, fantasies or hoaxes, coupled with a heated emotional atmosphere, I can only assert that it is my feeling that some UFO reports represent truly remarkable events." But Hendry admitted that "while science may be initiated by feelings, it cannot be based on them."

Hendry's investigation showed that nearly 28 percent of all UFO sightings reported to CUFOS proved to be bright stars and planets. Hendry noted that UFOs that turned out to be celestial bodies were often reported to "dart up and down," to "execute loops and figure eights." Occasionally the celestial UFO was reported to "meander in square patterns" or "zigzag." In 49 cases triggered by a bright celestial body, the witnesses estimated the UFO's distance at figures ranging from 200 feet to 125 miles.

When I first entered the UFO field, I would have challenged the idea that an intelligent person could mistake a bright celestial body for a UFO that was "following them." But numerous incidents, some involving law enforcement officers, have convinced me otherwise. If a person driving in a car sees a bright celestial object ahead and suspects that it might be a UFO, and accelerates to try to get closer, no matter how fast the driver goes, he/she cannot seem to gain on the UFO. If the driver then stops and gets out of the car, the "UFO" seems to halt also, because it is getting no bigger



CUFOS

A sheriff's deputy photographed this formation of UFOs over Connecticut in 1988. The Federal Aviation Administration identified the lights as low-flying private aircraft, although UFO proponents dispute this conclusion.

incandescence, which is what the observers in Nashville and Shoals saw. Once they concluded that this was a UFO, then the flaming fragments "became" windows illuminated from inside the craft. And their brains, unwittingly, supplied details of the craft's shape — based on what the observers had earlier read or heard about the shape of UFOs.

One of the universal characteristics of UFO reports generated by fireballs or reentering space debris is that the object always seems to be much closer than it actually is. In Hendry's book, he reported that nearly 9 percent of the 1,307 UFOs reported to CUFOS proved to be fireballs or reentering space debris.

Hendry, who retired from "UFOlogy" shortly after his book's publication and has never returned, discovered there are many, many trigger mechanisms for UFO reports besides bright planets, fireballs, reentering space debris, and the moon. These included hoax hot air balloons, weather and scientific balloons, missile launches, birds, and kites, to cite but a few.

Several years ago, shortly before I was to give a UFO lecture to the Seattle chapter of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, I was standing outside the lecture hall chatting with several attendees. Suddenly, one of them pointed skyward and said, "What's that?" I looked up and there was a small, orange object which seemed to be hovering at an altitude of several thousand feet.

Someone said: "It looks like a kite." I responded: "No, it's much too high to be a kite, maybe it's a weather balloon reflecting the nearly setting sun." The other party responded: "It can't be a balloon, it's not moving." Suddenly, a third man spoke up: "I think I have some binoculars in my car," and he hurried to get them. He returned with the binoculars, took a brief look and said: "It's a kite." When I viewed the UFO through the binoculars, I agreed.

Were it not for the happenstance that this man had a set of binoculars, I would have to admit that I saw a "UFO" in Seattle that appeared to be too high to be a kite and too stationary to be a weather balloon. But it was not doing anything extraordinary — or extraterrestrial.

For 45 years I have been writing for *Aviation Week & Space Technology* magazine — for 34 years as one of its senior editors and since my "active-retirement" in 1986, as a contributing editor. The magazine has published more articles on space travel than any other publication in the world. I can think of no more exciting story it could publish, or that I could write, than to be able to report that I have finally found a UFO case that defies any possible prosaic explanation. I would expect to win a Pulitzer Prize, a giant bonus, and great fame. So far, I've had no luck. But who knows, perhaps tomorrow — or next week. A

Leading UFO investigator Philip J. Klass is the author of UFOs: The Public Deceived, UFO Abductions: A Dangerous Game, *and two new books:* Bringing UFOs Down to Earth, *which is for children ages 9 and up, and* The REAL Roswell Crashed Saucer Coverup. *All of these books are published by Prometheus Books in Amherst, New York.*